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B1, 1.4(D)

Brian R Naranjo 12/13/2001 08:48:11 AM From DB/inbox: Brian R Naranjo

Cable Text:

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TELEGRAM

December 12, 2001

To: SECSTATE WASHDC - ROUTINE
Action: EB
From: AMEMBASSY CARACAS (CARACAS 3641 # ROUTINE)
TAGS: ECON, PREL, PGOV, ELAB, PINR, KPAO, VE
Captions: None
Subject: LAND REFORM ARRIVES: CHAVEZ PLAYS TO THE CROWD
Ref: CARACAS 03409

1. (U) Classified by Charge Frederick B. Cook by reason 1.5(B).

Summary

2. (SBU) Back in the friendly confines of Santa Inez, a pueblo deep in the President's home state of Barinas, Chavez enjoyed the adulation of a carefully screened crowd of 5-6 thousand supporters as he forcefully launched the controversial Land and Agrarian Reform Law. In a stem-winding speech, the President vented his rage at the "enemies of the revolution" and declared he would "rather die than turn back from his historic mission." Several thousand red-clad supporters bused in earlier that morning endured a sweltering day in the dusty lowland town. By the time the President's party arrived in a small flotilla of helicopters, a sizable minority of the crowd had given up and departed. Military presence in the form of checkpoints and sentries along the highways and in Santa Inez was extraordinary. End Summary.

A Very Effective Work Stoppage

3. (U) The long drive from the city of Merida to the town of Barinas in the llanos of Venezuela revealed an extremely effective work stoppage. Nearly every shop, restaurant and factory had their steel curtain "santamarías" drawn tightly down over their facades. Even the state-owned PDVSA gas stations and public schools were closed all along the 160-kilometer route and the roads were deserted. In the government-friendly town of Barinas, a few more establishments were open, but the sense of it being a sleepy Sunday morning was pervasive.

Playing to the Home Crowd

5. (U) The hamlet of Santa Inez (the site of an earlier land reform movement led by local hero Esquivel Zamora) lies 50 kilometers south of Barinas. The military presence along this section of the route was extraordinary. Not only did one have to pass through three heavily manned checkpoints where every vehicle was inspected and driver questioned, but a pair of sentries bearing assault rifles marked each kilometer. By the time Econoff arrived at noon, the single road leading into the town was blocked and several dozen buses were letting off their passengers for the long walk into town.

6. (SBU) Many of the arriving supporters unfurled large banners bearing the by now standard Bolivarian decrees: "The land is now free and the oligarchs tremble," "Thousands of families await their rightful land," "We urge you Chavez, do not turn back from

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REVIEW AUTHORITY: JOHN L MILLS
DATE/CASE ID: 05 JUN 2006 200304421

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the Revolution." (Note: Although some banners appeared homemade, the vast majority were of professional quality. When asked, the bearers admitted the banners were distributed by MVR organizers at their points of departure.)

7. (SBU) Early in the afternoon, the mood was festive and the people were expectant that the coming speech would make specific promises of land. Having traveled since early morning, hardly any of the arrivals were aware of the situation in Caracas or elsewhere in Venezuela. The general consensus was that the presidential party would be arriving shortly and the crowd would be on its way home by mid-afternoon. As it was along the approach route, the military presence in town was high -- army, navy, marines, National Guard, the various police forces -- and they were not dressed for the parade ground, but in field uniforms, with camouflage-painted faces and full weapon complement.

Bolivarian Fatigue

8. (SBU) The rally in Santa Ines was scheduled to commence at one o'clock and by early afternoon most of the 5-6 thousand "Chavistas" were in place in the smaller of the town's two public squares. As the heat increased, the town's vendors and few bodegas made a small killing selling beer to the crowds of mostly young men roaming the streets. Fireworks were lit off (with varying degrees of safety consciousness) and massive speakers blared music to the restless crowd. But by the time Chavez's helicopters arrived in a cloud of dust at four-thirty, many of the Bolivarian revolutionaries had called it a day and were seen drifting back exhausted to the buses and trucks lined along the roads leading into town.

9. (SBU) The speech itself was an anti-climax. Although the crowd that remained in the main square was energized by the arrival of the President, and Chavez was in high dudgeon slamming the
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"enemies of the Revolution and oppressors of the People," they wanted more. When it became clear that Chavez would not be issuing specific promises of land, more than one supporter shouted, "when will we get the land?" (Note: One somewhat critical banner read "Zamora gave us the land, but you only want to lend it," referring to the Land Law's restriction on the sale of confiscated/redistributed land.) Despite the late hour and lack of specifics, the crowd did enjoy the aggressive tone of the President's discourse.

Comment

Cook

Additional Addressees:
None

cc: -
AMEMBASSY BOGOTA

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AMEMBASSY LA PAZ
AMEMBASSY LIMA
AMEMBASSY QUITO

Distribution:

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	L-00	VCE-00	AC-01	NSAE-00	NSCE-00	OMB-01	OPIC-01
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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 003641

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/12
TAGS: ECON, PREL, PGOV, KPAO, ELAB, PINR, VE
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End Cable Text

Brian R Naranjo 12/13/2001 08:48:11 AM From DB/inbox: Brian R Naranjo

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